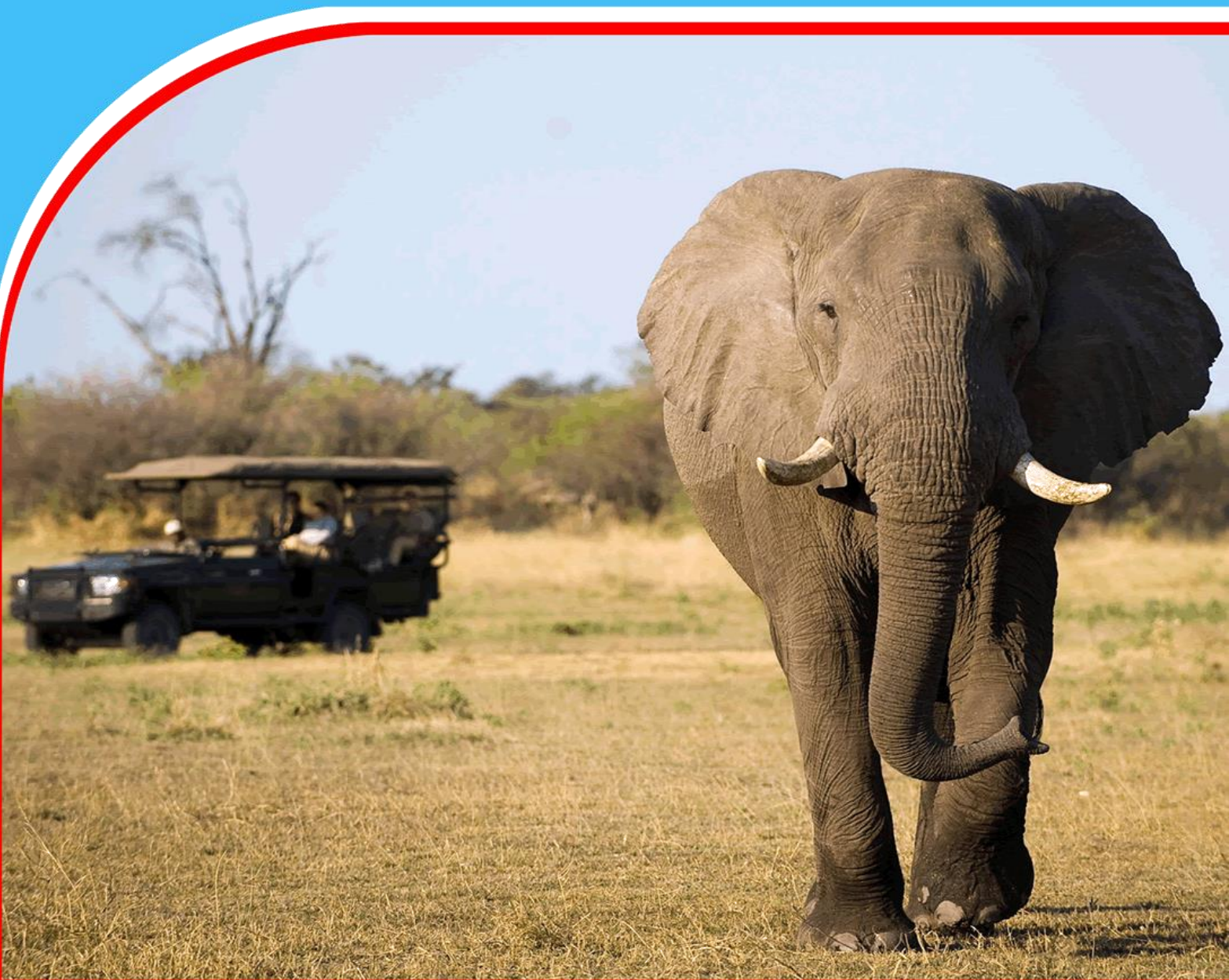


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**Post Covid Resilience and Recovery Strategy for
Tourism in Developing Countries: Tourism and
Hospitality Innovations during the Covid-19
Pandemic**

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Post Covid Resilience and Recovery Strategy for Tourism in Developing Countries: Tourism and Hospitality Innovations during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose: The tourism industry is one of the most dynamic in the world over due to the fact that customers' needs and demands are always changing. Furthermore, the environment in which the sector operates in is also changing so fast in terms of technological advancement and effects of climate change. This therefore calls for shift in the delivery of service and development of innovating ways in the Tourism and hospitality sector for its survival and growth. The study focused on the flexibility of the hotels to adapt to changes in the environment, its resilience in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic and the new innovations and creativity that helped the industry bounce back post Covid-19. The main objective was to examine the challenges that the tourism industry experienced during the Covid-19 period and establish the new innovations and business models adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya enabled the establishments to navigate through the challenges to resume hotel operations.

Methodology: The study was undertaken through online surveys in eighty-eight 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya with the respondents being hotel managers. Data was collected using a quantitative approach and adopted a cross-sectional research design. The data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Findings: The findings revealed enhanced use of technological and digital innovations in operational areas that comprised contactless reservation and check-in systems, new products and packaging, new ways and means of retailing/delivering the products and services to the customers without physical contact, cashless payment solutions, revised standard operating procedures in housekeeping and food and beverage service, safety, security and hygiene protocols and food production and dispensing. In addition, new opportunities for new markets were created and products diversified. The innovations have also created an avenue for tourism and hospitality trainers to review and realign curricula and mode of service to be in tandem with the changes in the socio-economic environment.

Recommendations: The study adds to the growing body of literature on new innovative ways used in the hospitality and tourism sector by leveraging on technology in the digital era. The findings of the study can be applied in the hotels in Kenya and beyond. It also recommends the development of a policy framework for collaboration and partnership for the region to facilitate and enhance tourism within East Africa and the Africa.

Keywords: *Tourism, Hospitality, Innovations, Technology*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has over the last six decades witnessed tremendous growth to become one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world according to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020). This was due to continued expansion, diversification, technological advances and the development of new business models. Globally, the tourism and hospitality industry experienced sustained growth for ten years from 2009 to 2019 with real growth of international receipts reaching 54% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and exceeding world GDP of 44% (UNWTO, 2020). For instance, in 2019, the tourism industry contributed 10.4% of global GDP or a value of over US\$8.8 trillion. The industry directly created 1 in every 10 jobs globally, an equivalent of 319 million jobs. (Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife report, 2020).

International tourist arrivals witnessed an impressive uninterrupted growth from 952 million visitors million in 2010 to 1.5 billion in 2019. The year 2019 was the tenth consecutive year of sustained growth since 2009, at 3.9%, even though this was slower compared to the exceptional rates of 2017 (+6%) and 2018 (+6%) (UNWTO, 2020a; WTTC, 2020a). Developed economies that comprise the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Pacific recorded remarkable growth in international arrivals with US recording 79.4m and US\$ 193 billion international tourism receipts, United Kingdom 39.4m amounting to US \$ 52 billion while Japan had 31.9m translating to US \$56.1 billion (UNWTO, 2020).

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), identified tourism as one of the most important industries in Africa contributing 8.5% or \$ 194.2bn of the continent's GDP in 2018 (African Travel & Tourism Association, 2019).

The performance of the sector in Kenya has also been impressive with international tourist arrivals increasing by 3.9% from 2.02 million tourists in 2018 to 2.05 million tourists in 2019 (Standard Media, 2020). Domestic tourism in Kenya has also been on an upward trend with numbers growing from 3,645,144 in 2017 to 3,974,243 in 2018, recording a 9.03% growth (Standard Media, 2020).

The hotel occupancy for bed-nights expanded by 6.3 percent between 2018 and 2019; further, the sector performance was boosted by conference tourism that expanded by 14.0 percent in 2019 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

However, this upward trajectory was brought to a sudden halt by the onset of the Covid -19 pandemic from March 2020. The pandemic had a significant impact on the tourism sector affecting tourism destinations worldwide and causing major disruptions that included airports, lock downs in countries and closure of hospitality establishments that resulted in major job losses (UNWTO, 2020). Despite the fact that the pandemic started during the low season in Kenya, the hotels experienced an abrupt and unprecedented drop in hotel demand that led to closure of most of the hotels and some staff sent on paid and unpaid leaves while others were terminated or laid off.

When the Covid -19 was declared the corona virus (Covid-19) a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020, a raft of measures and Covid -19 Protocols were developed by and implemented worldwide. Among the measures were that were to be

implemented were wearing of face masks, social distancing, washing of hands among other Covid-19 Protocols. As of 6 August 2022, the global cumulative incidence reached 580 940 852 reported cases and 6 423 296 associated deaths (WHO, 2022).

Over the last two and a half years, the Covid-19 infections have decreased worldwide and the tourism and hospitality industry which is very resilient has started to gain ground and pick up. Furthermore, the industry operates in a highly competitive environment that demands new innovations and new business models for continued existence, improved performance and business growth (Dzhandzhugazova, Blinova & Romanova, 2016). As we deal with the Covid -19 pandemic and its aftermath, people must learn to adopt to the “new normal”, learn to co-exist with the virus and manage the inherent risks associated with the virus (WTTC, 2021).

Hotels in Kenya in this study were greatly affected by the Covid -19 crisis and most of them had to close in the initial pandemic period in 2020. This included star rated and non-star rated establishments. The classification star rating is used in Kenya is the East African Classification Criteria that ranges from one star to the five stars (Tourism Regulatory Authority, 2015).

Problem Statement

The unprecedented break out of the Covid- 19 pandemic brought the whole world to a standstill as it affected all countries leading to lock downs, limited cross border travel, travel restrictions, hotel and entertainment establishments’ closures and businesses were brought to a standstill. There was need for the development and creation on new innovations and ideas to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and also business needed to continue and people needed to get a source of livelihood. New innovations and business models were necessary for the hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry to absorb the shock, pick up the pieces and move on. Furthermore, the need to satisfy the ever-changing needs of the customer and the dynamic tourism and hospitality landscape demands innovative ways of doing things. The industry therefore invented new innovations, new products, services, processes and created new business models to be able to continue operations amidst the Covid-19 crisis.

Purpose of Study

The study aimed at establishing the new innovations and business models adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya during and post Covid -19 pandemic.

General Objective

To examine the challenges that the tourism industry experienced during the Covid -19 period and establish the new innovations and business models adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya that enabled the establishments to navigate through the challenges to resume hotel operations.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the challenges experienced by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. To identify new technological process innovations adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya during the Covid – 19 pandemic.
3. To determine new products developed by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic.
4. To assess new services adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya.
5. To examine new opportunities identified by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What challenges were experienced by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic?
2. What new technological process innovations were adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in the tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya during the Covid – 19 pandemic?
3. What new products were developed by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic?
4. What new services were adopted by 4- and 5-Star hotels in in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic?
5. What new opportunities were identified by 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya’s tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid – 19 pandemic?

Significance of the Study

This study is important as it will create awareness and enlighten on new technological innovations in the industry, new products and services in the industry which may spark competition in the tourism and hospitality industry making it more rejuvenated and robust.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism and hospitality sector has in the last six decades experienced exponential but the unprecedented outbreak of Covid-19 from the beginning of March 2020 and has brought the industry to its knees. There have been lockdowns in most countries of the world for the last two years, closure of airports, hotel and travel establishments and limited cross border travel. Most business in the tourism and hospitality sector shut down for close to two years during which mitigation measures and recovery strategies were developed. In 2020, 62 million jobs were lost, leaving 271 million employed across the sector globally compared to 333. This represents 18.6 % drop in just one year, however, 2021 showed slight recovery with 18.2 million jobs comprising 6.7% increase (WTTC, 2022).

Apart from implementing and adhering to Covid -19 protocols, businesses had to re-engineer themselves to cope with the “new normal” which included working from home setting, home schooling lock downs, online meetings, quarantine and mandatory wearing of face masks in in public. The new normal presented increased demand by travelers for more hygienic facilities,

touchless and digital experiences while governments in most of the countries introduced requirements for proof of a travelers Covid-19 status and a greater focus on infrastructure relating to health and safety (WTTC, 2021).

The realization that business and life needed to go on propelled the growth of innovations in the industry in hotel operations with healthy and safety of the customer taking priority. Because of the harsh reality that Covid-19 was going to be with us for a long time, adopting new ways of doing things and creating new innovations would impact customers' choice of a hotel and are critical to the existence and sustainability of the tourism and hospitality industry in challenging times such as the Covid -19 pandemic (Victorino, Verma, Plaschka, & Dev 2005).

Challenges Experienced by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

The hotel and tourism industry in Kenya faced a myriad of challenges during the Covid -19 pandemic period that resulted in closure of hotels and schools, restriction of travel, trade and mass gatherings; limited restaurant seating capacity due social distancing Covid -19 protocols, curtailed operating hours due to the curfew that was imposed in the country, staff layoffs and reduction in hotel sales for hotels that remained in operation. In addition, most businesses and government offices were closed and the few that were open allowed staff to work virtually from their homes (WTTC, 2021). The overall effect and impact of the pandemic was a general reduction of economic productivity and public services among others, therefore causing hardships and socio-economic consequences (WHO, 2020). This unprecedented turn of events ignited new thinking and a new way of doing things in order for the businesses to resume operations.

Tourism and hospitality establishments in Kenya experienced significant lose in revenue putting the business in heavy debt in terms of overheads. When the Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed a little, bookings were being made last minute as compared to before pandemic due to the stringent compliance requirements for travel. There were massive cancellations of hotel reservations which necessitated rationalization of staff that resulted in reduced number of employees, contract termination and even layoffs. The hotel supplies were also affected and getting production materials created a challenge. In addition, the pandemic impact resulted in reduced organizations' financial reserves as the funds were depleted during the pandemic period to cover overhead costs (MoTW, 2020).

New Products Developed by 4- And 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

The covid-19 crisis changed the dynamics in hotel operations as enterprises in an effort to comply with the covid protocols and also meet their obligations. Many new products were innovated and created that included delivery self-help apps for food & beverage, car bookings, salon and spa bookings, growth of in-room dining services, drive through food and beverage outlets, increased individually packaged foodstuff, use of robots and artificial intelligence (AI). Some of the apps have video livestreaming like *Douyin* while *Wechat*, *Taobao*, *Weibo*, and *Xiaohongshu* that can be used for sales and marketing but require large investments and training of users (Xu, 2020). AI is being used for face recognition and scanning body temperature and it has proven to be

increasingly useful for hotel operations. For instance, the ease and efficiency of check-in and check-out experience are improved by giving hotel guests access to their rooms/venues using facial recognition software (Lau, 2022). Various hotel operations adopted live streaming using apps to attract hotel customers, demonstrated food cooking in the kitchen, conducted hotel room virtual tours and wedding exhibitions (Lau, 2020).

The development of *Vouch*, a tech-based concierge has made the storage, retrieval and use of data more reliable and efficient thus enabling prompt responses that are far more contactless without human intervention and safer to operate (Aromaco, 2016).

The hotels had to change their business model by narrowing down their product offering to effectively use the food delivery apps. According to Ali, Khalid, Javed, & Islam, 2020, technology in the food industry has migrated from manufacturing, production and preservation processes to online food delivery ordering (OFDO) services that enable customers to search and select their preferred food establishments for home deliveries. This in turn led to the growth of internet technological start-ups and also stimulated demand for smart phones usage by consumers. The OFDO's provided faster and convenient service that has now changed the landscape of food service operations.

This necessitated changes in business structures, the whole food supply chain, service flow and routine food and beverage operations including the standard operating procedures (Ali, Khalid, Javed, & Islam, 2020).

New Services Adopted by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

Hotels world over have adopted newer and unique methods in their operations to help the industry bounce back as keeping pace with the changing trends is the key to survival today (Schumpeter, 2007). According this scholar, anyone seeking profits must innovate. He defines innovation as the "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one incessantly creating a new one". He further suggests that innovation is considered as an important driver of competitiveness and economic dynamics.

Research conducted in China by Lau, 2021 to examine new approaches to make money and remain afloat during challenging times found that the enhancement of information flow through use of modern technology optimizes innovation, brand awareness, better connectivity, reduced safety risks and ultimately lead to a positive impact to the hotels. The study found that the improvement of information system quality was one of the main contributors to operational efficiency and guest satisfaction. In furtherance to this, the 5G and Wi-fi 6 technologies were introduced to improve the quality of the information system. The 5G connectivity allowed intelligent connectivity using AI, a combination that enables swift check in and guest bill settlement through facial recognition which in turn leads to operational efficiency and security.

New Technological Process Innovations Adopted by 4- And 5-Star Hotels in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Kenya during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

Innovative technologies in the hotel industry in service delivery is paramount and may be in the form of a new or differentiated product or service, technology, change in the hotels operational process, standard operating procedures, business models or marketing approaches (Dzhandzhugazova, 2015). These innovative technologies aim at achieving customer satisfaction and the need to remain competitive and sustainable. (Evangalista, 2014). Research has also demonstrated that a hotel’s performance will sooner or later diminish and its competitiveness lost if it is not involved in any innovation process (Ilyenkova & Kuznetsov, 2009). With the Covid-19 pandemic and lessons learnt, the industry requires ideas that are innovative in order to help sustain the industry during such times (Victorino *et al.*, 2005).

Technological innovations like touchless check-in systems to robots working instead of humans would assist in providing a contactless service and lessening the chance of spreading the virus from a person to another (Pardo, Cooper, Steiner & Claster, 2013). In Kenya, star rated hotels adopted automated integrated software and cashless revenue collection systems well before the Covid -19 but the disease has made the need to change to cashless systems a necessity (Murimi & Wadongo 2021). In addition, hotels adopted use live-streaming platforms, therefore, enabled the hotel to create online communities, generate meaningful discussions on its product offerings, attract more hotel guests, communicate and share ideas.

According to Lau, 2020, the use of robots in shopping malls increased in China during Covid-19 pandemic period in an effort to adhere to social distancing protocols. Hotels also adopted them for jobs that could not be done by hotel employees in food and beverage dining services and dispensing of sanitizers and masks to enhance guest safety, prevent the spread of the virus enhance service quality and customer satisfaction.

New Opportunities Identified by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya’s Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

One of the biggest opportunities arising from the covid-19 crisis for Africa is digital transformation. The pandemic has proved to be the catalyst for innovation and integration of new technologies for the travel and tourism sector. It has opened new prospects for the development of information and communication technologies (Bama, Nyathela & Makuzva, 2022). Their study found that digitization, collaborations, partnerships and integrated governance frameworks as key adaptations and best practices for the hospitality sector in Africa.

In Guangzhou, China new business opportunities emerged including companies that conduct live stream conferencing which had benefits of increased content delivery choices while the attendees had decreased health risks, savings on travel time and costs. For the virtual exhibition events, marketers had a wider geographic reach of workforce and customers (Center for Exhibit Industry Research, 2009).

Ultimately, digital economy and contactless services will be the new frontier and become the “new normal” with self-serving apps, kiosks and robots used to attract and retain customers in the future (Lau, 2020).

Summary of Gaps from Literature Review

The literature review indicates that establishments in the hospitality and tourism industry have made great strides in embracing technological innovations particularly with the onset of Covid-19 in effort to remain in business. The study conducted by Ali et al., 2020 in China on online food deliveries (OFDO) led to technological start-ups that stirred increased consumer demand for smartphone usage. Lau, 2021 researched on new approaches to make money through using improved quality information systems in China. The study by Murimi & Wadongo, 2021 was on the application of revenue management systems that are cashless in five star hotels in Kenya while Bama et al., did their study on innovations, adaptations and best practices that could facilitate rebuilding of the hospitality and tourism industry in Africa.

The literature reviewed shows that there is a contextual gap as previous researches conducted were in geographical locations in the continent of Asia and Africa and the one for Kenya by Murimi & Wadongo, 2021 mainly focused innovations for revenue management. Furthermore, the studies conducted are limited and therefore the need to conduct the research in Kenya.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored on Michael Porters the theory of competitive advantage (Porter, 1998) that stipulates that the competitiveness of a nation in the industry it operates in, is highly dependent on its ability to innovate and upgrade its products and services. The operating business environment and context propels organizations to make strategic decisions to able to survive and thrive during difficult times like the Covid -19 era and beyond. A study by Enz and Siguaw's (2003), on culinary innovations processes established that foodservice firms and restaurants should establish a culture that supports innovation to create a competitive advantage. During the Covid-19 period, organizations adopted business models based on this theory and redefined their operating systems and processes to be contactless and more efficient while at the same time satisfying customer needs. The hospitality and tourism establishments embarked on a journey of digital transformation where technological innovations became the key driver to achieving organizational goals affirming that the existence and sustainability of the hospitality and tourism industry is based on leveraging on technology and new innovations (Victorino, Verma, Plaschka, & Dev, 2005). Furthermore, the business model of adopting technology also ensured quality improvement of the processes, products and services resulting to quality service delivery to customers.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive design and was carried out in 4 and 5 star rated hotels in Kenya that offer accommodation between September and November, 2022. According to TRA, there are eighty-eight 4- and 5-Star establishments in Kenya out of a total 211 star rated establishments in Kenya (TRA, 2015). Questionnaires were administered to all the 88 hotels that comprised the target population with the respondents being the hotel managers. The study was undertaken through online surveys in 4- and 5-Star hotels in Kenya. Data was collected using a quantitative approach and adopted a cross-sectional approach research design. The data analysis was done using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

4.0 FINDINGS

Demographic Data

Out of a total 88 questionnaires that were sent to the 4 and 5 hotels, 30 hotels responded representing a response rate of 34.09%. The findings indicate that 97% of the respondents were over 30 years of age while 3% were under 30 years of age. In terms of education, 87% of the respondents were graduates while 13% were non graduates. On job experience, 90% of the respondents had over 10 years and 10% had under 10 years. The findings indicate that a balance on gender with 50% of the respondents being either male or female.

On the hotel classification 80% of the responses were from four-star hotel category and 20% were five-star hotel category. Out of the total responses, 80% of the hotels use domestic market, 10% had outbound market, 3% had inbound market, there was 7% non-response.

From the findings, 40% of the respondents had work capacity of 101-250, 37% had work capacity of 51-100, 13% had work capacity of more than 250, 7% had work capacity of 10-50, while 3% had work capacity of up to 10 employees. The study also found out that 97% of the respondents were engaged in e-working when hotel was closed while 3% did not engage in e-working and out of those working online 60% of the respondents used online platforms while 40% communicated via WhatsApp and short text messaging (sms). The study also found out that 3 of the establishments were closed at the onset of the covid-19 and had not reopened by the time of the study.

Challenges Experienced by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

Results from the study indicated that most of the hotels experienced a myriad of challenges during the Covid- 19 period with above 33% of the hotels losing 31-50% of bookings, 27% lost 50-90% of bookings, 23% lost 10-30% of bookings while 7% had lost over 90%.

These findings are reflection of the status of the hospitality globally as tourism and travel came to an abrupt halt at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The findings are in line with a study undertaken by UNWTO (2020) that found that the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on the tourism sector affecting tourism destinations worldwide and causing major disruptions that included airports, lock downs in countries and closure of hospitality establishments.

In addition, most of the hotels (93%) reported that they instituted measures to mitigate loss of revenue and reduce on operating expenses. These included reducing staff, unpaid leaves and pay cuts. The hotel closures resulted in major job losses with 73% of the hotels indicating that they had to reduced staff numbers, 13% did not lose staff while 7% retained all their staff but with some reductions in salaries. From the study, 93% of the respondents said their business had enforced salary pay cuts for employees while 7% had not enforced pay cuts. The pay cuts ranged from 10 % to 70% with over half (52%) of the hotels reducing the salaries by between 20% to 50%. On unpaid leave the study revealed that most of the hotels sent staff on unpaid leave with 56% sending between 30% and 70% of their employees on unpaid leave. The study indicated that 30% of the hotels in the study reported that there were separations as permanent staff were laid off due to total

the closure of hotel operations during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 while majority of the hotel (20) discontinued contracts and seasonal staff engagements.

All the hotels in the study reported that there were cancellation bookings as a consequence of Covid-19 pandemic with 66% waiving all cancellation fees and 31% encouraged re-booking or rescheduling of the trips. On hotel closure, 83% of the hotels closed during the peak Covid-19 period for between one and nine months, while only 17% continued with operations. The findings indicated that 53% did not anticipate disruptions in earnings. The respondents gave various reasons for this among them their ability to adapting to change quickly and adopting new normal of doing things like online/virtual meetings for meetings and conferences. The findings are in line with the report from WHO, 2020 and WTTC, 2021 that reported that the overall effect and impact of the pandemic was a general reduction of economic productivity and public services among others.

The study findings (47% of respondents) indicated that anticipated disruptions of earnings Covid-19 crisis would continue until June 2022 and that the expected recovery period for the Tourism and hospitality industry would be between 6 months to 1.5 years. The respondents suggested that investor's inability to sustain the wage bill, massive cancellations of bookings and closure of some of the destinations would bring an end to international and continental travel. Furthermore, lack of consistent income would have an immediate negative impact on the business since money is the life blood of any business, loss of revenue through low demand for accommodation, reduction of sitting capacity in food and beverage outlets and that the crisis would affect demand for travel.

Findings from the study on the short-term effect was that show that majority of the respondents, over 59% expected a significant impact on their businesses. On the long-term impact, the study findings indicated that 53% of respondents were of the opinion that it would be significant, 17% anticipated that would be critical and 14% catastrophic.

Views on the resilience of the Tourism and hospitality industry stated that the sector was fairly resilient with 60% of the respondents would rating it as fair while 23% thought that the sector was very resilient to a large extent. The reasons given by the respondents included; quick adaptation to change, most hospitality establishments bounced back with the slowdown of the pandemic, some regions like Kisumu indicated that business picked up quickly, the industry embraced the Covid-19 Protocols quickly and complied therefore adapting to the "new normal", the industry always bounces back because people must travel, eat and sleep, establishments targeting the domestic market for conference tourism were quick to reopen and capture the local market, establishments that closed reopened and staff resumed work, the pandemic aided in innovation and alternative business sources were sought and that travel adventure and hospitality is a way of life nowadays. Some of the hotels adapted to sustainable business practices flexible working modalities, flexible workforce, and outsourcing certain services that were not their core business.

Popular destinations like Maasai Mara, Diani beach and Malindi took time to reopen and inflow of the international tourists was very low resulting in a negative impact on the overall economy of the tourism and hospitality industry. Some of the hotels had to reorganize their financing by

requesting for loan moratoriums with the banks. These study findings on challenges experienced by the hotel industry are in line with the reports from the Ministry of Tourism & Wildlife, 2020 and WHO, 2020.

New Technological Process Innovations Adopted by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Kenya during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

Results from the study indicates that 87% of the respondents attributed most of its business resumption to innovations. In addition, 90% of the respondents rated digitalization of business processes as a critical factor that aided the resumption of hotel operations in the Covid-19 period. From the survey 87 % of the respondents reported that they had introduced touchless technologies in their hotels. Some of the innovations introduced included digital feedback system from the guests using hotel apps, paperless menus in restaurants and eateries that were accessed through a QR code, online reviews using trip advise, enhancement of site network connectivity, use of online reservation/booking platform and social media marketing, online orders using “Uber eats” and “Glovo” distribution channels, introduction of Property Management Systems (PMS), video conferencing for meetings and conferences and Virtual Private Network (VPN) working to enable remote functions/ touchless payments. The introduction of these innovations and digital systems was critical as sustainability is key due to changing trends to satisfy clients’ demands for sustainable tourism products and services. Furthermore, technology was crucial for marketing and adherence to post covid-19 requirements.

Other innovations that were developed that are of great selling point for promoting their hotels comprised contactless express check in and check out, development of destination e-commerce sites through collaborations with destinations, enhanced digital marketing, drive through sales for takeaways, new packaging and branding for mobile distribution through online platforms, increased online presence in all platforms, showcasing of different theme nights, promoting hotel packages and spas, aggressive online trade shows and client engagement activities, more contact less points of service for products, introduction of new positions like social media -strategist, adoption of sustainable tourism practices through various conservation initiatives including the turtle and butterfly conservation projects, paid up google adverts and conducting market intelligence. Eco rated hotels leveraged on their gold eco rating and use of solar power energy as a distinct advantage to market their establishments as attractive destinations for prospective clients who value sustainability and environmental conservation.

On upgrading of hotel products and services, 93% of the respondents agreed that there was upgrading of the products/services and use of technology in their hotels while 7% did not have upgrades as their properties were closed and staff declared redundant. The respondents also reported that their establishments dedicated time every day for posting content online with 87% of the respondents stating that they post content online for daily efficient operations while 10% did not. In addition, 70% of the respondents diversified their online distribution to a large extent while 23% had minimal distribution.

On the issue of flexibility, the respondents reported that their hotels were flexible in adopting the Covid -19 protocols and use of technology was relatively easy however investment in high tech

technology was not possible not due to initial capital requirements. The hotels adapted swiftly and were flexible implementing the Covid -19 protocols without compromising service delivery. The respondents further indicated that there was increased use of online digital platforms, virtual as opposed to in-person hotel tours social media and websites.

The above findings on the use of technology to drive hotel businesses conforms with results conducted in the sector by Lau, 2020 and Murimi & Wadongo 2021.

New Products Developed by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

Findings from the study revealed that 57% of the respondents agreed that their organizations had reviewed their products to a large extent and 37% had fairly reviewed their products in an effort to improve quality of products and reputation.

New products were innovated as a result of shifts in the operations and customer needs necessitated by covid-19 dynamic in their hotel the respondents gave various responses.

The front office section in hotels adopted cashless payments systems, automated door card systems for each floor that limits access to non-residents, contactless check in at front desk with touchscreens for self-check in, online check in, virtual tours as opposed to hotel brochures and pamphlets, personalizing the guest needs as per individual request, introduction of hotel apps for in-house guests, cashless payments using Safaricom mpesa platform and credit cards and upgraded and installed software and hard ware to integrate reservations with all other sales outlets in the hotel.

On food and beverage, the respondents reported that their first challenge was to re-organize restaurant seating capacity and set up arrangements to be in compliance with the Covid-19 protocols. In addition, menu reengineering was done to accommodate more ala carte menu items that comprised fast foods and take away services, enhanced outside catering services, increased use of minibars, home deliveries and in-room service packages. The respondents indicated that there was a deliberate effort by management to have more investment in online conference facilities to attract mice business via online virtual meetings, digital menus with QR codes and private dining were encouraged.

In housekeeping, stocking up rooms with sanitizers, masks and all additional facilities which guests may ask for during their stay, digital "make my room " and "do not disturb", improved signage, card door locks, sensor lights in bathroom, installation of new smart TVs that are interactive and displays room information as opposed to printed room directory/booklets, mobile hoovers were assigned to individual room stewards, more flexible working tools were acquired and mobile apps developed for communication with guests/requests/feedback.

The results of this study are in congruence with findings by According to Ali, Khalid, Javed, & Islam, 2020.

New Services Adopted by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Kenya

The study indicates that 97% of the respondents agreed that the hotel has invested in new service provisions which ensures they follow safe systems of work to prevent spread of covid-19. The respondents indicated that new service innovations were necessary as a result of shifts in the operations and new requirements for both the customer and the hotel. The new service innovations for the operational departments of front office, food and beverage service, food production and housekeeping.

The findings reveal that the hotels reviewed reservation, check in/check out and billing procedures to be contactless and upgraded software and hardware to enable smooth operations of the department. The study indicated that 87% of the respondents adopted touchless technology in their hotel, while 10% had not adopted. Separate check in counters were set up in the reception and were equipped with touch screens and the times for group check-in were scheduled at different times to avoid overcrowding. Staff working on night shifts were reduced to enable them to go home before the curfew hours. Virtual tours of hotel facilities replaced hotel brochures and fliers that were initially distributed physically. In addition, the hotels boosted internet bandwidth to enhance connectivity.

Food service style was adjusted to allow for individualized type of service instead of buffets, room service was encouraged, and beverage and snacks vending machines were introduced in some of the hotels. Physical menu presentation to guests was replaced with digital menus to avoid touching of menus by different customers and home deliveries, takeaways and outside catering for small groups was encouraged and promoted through online platforms. Partnerships and collaborations with mobile food distribution channels like uber eats and glovo increased.

Meal times were allocated per group running thus minimizing the possibility for groups mix up and avoid overcrowding in the restaurants. In addition, the seating arrangements was re-organized to allow for social distancing of 1.5-2.0 meters between tables and a limitation on table capacity as per the Covid protocols. Spaces in restaurants were partitioned or separated using screens and plants to provide private sections that made it more private and separated the guests. Bar stools around the counters were done away with and there was provision of hand wash stations in the restaurants, bars and entry points.

For banqueting and conferencing, rooms were converted into private meeting rooms that were ideal for small group meetings that were personalized. Furthermore, hotels adopted video conferencing technology and zoom for online meetings.

Buffet style of service was limited and use of gloves for serving was adopted by the kitchen staff. A la carte and table d'hôte menus were preferred to allow for less physical contact among the guests and staff. Some hotels that continued with buffet service provided disposable gloves to all guests picking food at the buffet counter. Desserts were prepared and served in individual small containers/plates to allow for individual portions.

The housekeeping department provided personalized customer service while maintaining social distance and avoiding direct contact. The room amenities included sanitizers, masks and all additional facilities which guest may require for during their stay.

Fumigation of the rooms was done more frequently and housekeeping cleaning procedures were reviewed to comply with Covid -19 hygiene and safety protocols. Evening turndown in the rooms was done away with in most of the hotels under study. The department ensured provision of sanitizers in all public areas including lift, corridors, lobby, reception and hotel entrance. In addition, the hotels provided facilitation of in house Covid-19 testing for guests and staff.

Wearing of masks was mandatory for all and were treated as part of staff uniform. Some hotels branded the masks for their employees as part of their apparels. Continuous training on managing the customer needs in the Covid -19 era with emphasis on customer safety became the norm.

New Technological Process Innovations Were Adopted by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Kenya during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

The respondents were asked about the new technological processes their hotel developed to mitigate Covid -19 challenges and adhere to covid-19 protocols. As part of adherence to government policies and health and safety protocols that were released by the Kenyan government through the Ministry of Health, the hotels reviewed their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and introduced the following processes to enable smooth operations.

The hotels introduced new processes that enables contactless check in and check out, cashless payments, online digital feedback system, customization of guest stay by offering different packages, Ultra Violet scanners for checks, temperature checks for all customers and staff upon entry and maintaining updated resident guests' health charts, luggage sanitizing, regular health checks of the team and providing regular trainings on Covid -19 protocols to the team members. In addition, automatic handwashing basins at every exit and entry point were installed and sanitizers were placed in all public areas, meeting rooms and lifts.

Some of the hotels that used to have manual door keys introduced card locks, digital do not disturb signs and controlled access to rooms using the electronic key cards. CCTV cameras were also enhanced to cover the public areas to allow monitoring movements of both staff and guests.

The development of hotel applications (hotel apps) for resident guests in hotels gained popularity as guest could get all the hotel info on the up instead of the traditional hotel directory placed in the rooms. These results on new technological innovations in the hotel industry are in line with studies conducted by Bama, Nyathela & Makuzva, 2022.

New Opportunities Identified by 4- and 5-Star Hotels in Kenya's Tourism and Hospitality Industry during the Covid – 19 Pandemic

However, the Covid -19 pandemic opened new opportunities for the hotel and tourism industry. From the study, all the respondents agreed that Covid -19 has offered an opportunity to adjust to the development and trends in the organization. These included the creation of customer attendee websites for meetings, group link booking platforms that complimented the traditional online platforms, enhancement of ICT infra structure, hybrid meeting approaches that covered both

physical and online meetings, multiskilling of staff, increased outside catering demand and increased sales from take away services, robust e-marketing through social media /digital platforms.

The respondents also reported that they noted increased operational efficiency and productivity rate per employee and fewer employees on sick offs. The staff schedules had fewer staff in the shifts but absenteeism rates were lower. This is supported by the research findings as 100% of the respondents agreed that cleaning and disinfection measures and other Covid -19 precautionary measures have generally improved overall health and hygiene in the hotel. In addition, 100% of the respondents agreed that the management informed all staff of the measures that could protect their health and also organized regular information briefings that covered all basic protective measures against Covid-19.

The respondents further indicated that there was a notable increase in domestic tourism numbers when the hotels resumed operations after the Covid -19 travel restrictions were lifted. All the respondents (100%) agreed that there was sensitization to stay at home and seek medical attention if anyone had symptoms of Covid -19.

The findings are supported by previous studies done by Haywood, 2020 which revealed that domestic tourism could be regenerated and activated with the strict adherence of covid-19 protocols.

Intermediate to Short-Term Policies and Response Strategies Has Your Business/Organization Put in Place to Ensure Recovery of Kenya's Tourism Sector from the Covid-19 Crisis

The respondents gave their suggestions on intermediate and short-term policies response strategies that their business organization put in place to ensure recovery of Kenya's tourism sector from the covid-19 crisis. They included alignment and adherence to set out procedure by the government, review of pricing strategies, development of cashless payments policy, extended discounts on hotel products and services, waivers on cancellations gave clients option of postponing the reservation to a future date, provided special deals/packages to entice the domestic market, incentives offered to suppliers and agents, implementation of cost cutting measures on non-essentials, reduced credit period for creditors, reduced bulk purchases, aggressive digital advertising through social media platforms and use of virtual tours for marketing the product and services. There was also a focus on reducing dependence on international business and leveraging on the local tourism business with conference business growing significantly over the period. Risk based approach to managing operations was an aspect that some hotels adopted in regards to staffing to ensure they have the right number of staffing that is able to cater for low periods of business as well as strengthening peak season staffing to cover for traditionally busy periods.

Long-Term Response Strategies and Actions Hotels Put towards Full Recovery of Kenya's Tourism Sector after Covid-19 Crisis

The respondents were asked about the long-term response strategies and actions the hotels put towards full recovery of Kenya's tourism sector after covid-19 crisis. They indicated that they would review their long-term strategies to include diversifying the markets to avoid over reliance

on international travel by embracing regional and domestic travel, invest more on technology, conduct aggressive marketing campaigns, product and market diversification.

It is predicted that the industry will slowly get back to normal operations and according to UNWTO projections, recovery is expected to reach 65% of its pre pandemic level by end of 2022 (UNWTO, 2022). In addition, the report stated that the prediction of recovery was advanced by healthy pent-up demand, enhanced confidence levels and the lifting of covid-19 limitations more destinations.

Other Ways the Covid -19 Pandemic Affected Hotels

The respondents were asked to describe other ways that the Covid -19 pandemic affected their businesses. The responses were varied and included increased use of internet by staff and therefore a reduction on paper use paper use that resulted in savings on stationery, faster and easier way of communication via WhatsApp with staff/teams. In addition, the surrounding community benefited from the hotels/lodges' vaccination campaigns against pandemic which led to improved relations between the hotels/lodges/resorts and the community.

The Covid -19 also affected the general welfare of staff as most were affected through loss of relatives. Customer confidence in provision of hospitality services was affected and there is need to reassure clients about the hotel's compliance particularly on hygiene aspects so that they can continue patronizing the hotels/lodges.

Current and Future Expectations from the Government to Enable Hotels Recover From the Effects of Covid -19

The respondents were asked about their current and future expectations from the government to enable their business/organization recover from the effects of Covid -19.

They indicated that the Government should create subsidies or a fund that would cushion organizations in the event of such a pandemic, offer tax incentives to the industry to aid recovery like zero rating of sustainable energy solutions and waivers on business taxes/ licenses, increase funding to market the country, provide an enabling environment by setting policies and framework to manage crisis, have a policy on open skies to allow more airlines to fly into the country, provide a tax haven especially on essential commodities used by hotel and aggressive marketing of the destination through Kenya Tourism Board (KTB) requested an increase in economic stimulus package and ease the requirements to get it.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations on the Training Model/Curriculum Delivery in the Post Covid-19 Era

The respondents were asked about their recommendations on the training model/curriculum delivery in the post covid-19 era. In their responses, they indicated that there was need to review the curriculum to include disaster and crisis management, online course modules which will be more cost effective and reach more people, digital demos on practical areas using tiktok videos and enhanced capacity building for the industry.

The Covid -19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on hospitality industry, however it created an avenue for new innovations, enhanced digital systems and opened new opportunities

that are critical for sustainable tourism in the sector. Technology has been identified as the new frontier in digital revolution and therefore a crucial factor in marketing, cost cutting and improving business performance. The hotels introduced new processes that enabled contactless front of house services, cashless payments, online digital feedback and communication mechanisms, customization of guest stay by offering different packages and use of online meeting platforms like zoom and Microsoft teams.

Some of the hotels adapted to sustainable business practices that included flexible working modalities, lean workforce and outsourcing of non-core services. The hotels were quick to adapt to with most of them bouncing back with the slowdown of the pandemic infection rates and relaxation of Covid-19 requirements.

Furthermore, the crisis put on focus the importance of having more collaborations, partnerships between health and safety tourism and hospitality sectors. Besides, the need to have mutual relationships and networking with various levels of government, as well as public-private partnerships becomes a critical factor.

Recommendations from the study findings call for long-term strategies comprising diversifying markets to avoid over reliance on international travel by embracing regional and domestic travel, more investments on technology, aggressive marketing campaigns particularly on online platform, product and market diversification. In addition, the training model in hospitality institutions needs to be changed in order to equip the workforce with both basic and advanced digital skills to enable them manage customer needs in the Covid -19 era with greater emphasis on customer health and safety.

The study adds to the growing body of literature on innovative practices in the hospitality sector and leveraging on technology in this digital era. However, further studies can be conducted in all hotels whether classified or not in Kenya and the East African region.

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